

THE WHITE HOUSE

Washington

September 22, 2009

MEMORANDUM FOR WHITE HOUSE STAFF AND FOR AGENCY AND DEPARTMENT HEADS

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RE: GUIDELINES FOR PUBLIC OUTREACH MEETINGS

As some of you may be aware, a recent telephone conference call involving members of the U.S. arts community and members of the Administration, including officials from the National Endowment for the Arts, has been the subject of questions and attention. The purpose of the call was to encourage voluntary participation by the arts community in a national service initiative. Voluntary participation in national service is, of course, a critically important part of the Administration's commitment to engaging the public with our government. Some comments made in the call, however, have been misunderstood as seeking to inappropriately politicize activities of the NEA.

The Administration has expressed its regrets as to any comments on the call that may have been misunderstood and troubled some participants. To the extent there is any misunderstanding about what the Administration may do in its public outreach, we are taking steps to correct it. To that end, this memorandum provides some guidelines regarding our vitally important outreach efforts. Because this memorandum provides only a summary of relevant issues, you should consult with your agency's general counsel when you have questions about public outreach efforts.

1. Avoid Even the Appearance of Impropriety. President Obama has pledged to restore Americans' trust in their government. Strict adherence to the rules is not enough – we need to avoid even the appearance of politicization in order to ensure people's faith in the actions of the Administration. This means always asking whether an action under consideration could be construed as inappropriate. If there is even a possible question that could be raised regarding an activity under contemplation, you should consult with your agency's general counsel before proceeding.

2. Continue to Ensure That Decisions Are Merit Based. This Administration is committed to ensuring that public funds are expended responsibly and in a transparent manner and that all policy decisions are based on the merits. This means making sure that all funding decisions are consistent with legal requirements and are formulated to ensure satisfaction of each agency's mission. For those agencies that engage in grant-making, it is the policy of this Administration that those funding decisions be free of political interference or even the appearance thereof. We appreciate NEA's statement that its grant-making has been, and will continue to be, based on the merits.
3. Engagement with Non-Governmental Organizations and Citizens Should Be Even-Handed. Agencies should always ensure that they serve the needs of the American public without regard to party. This does not mean that government officials are not permitted to meet with individuals or select groups as agency needs and the public interest demand. Rather, government officials should not give preference to one person or organization over another based on improper political considerations.
4. Engage Only in Authorized Activities. Each federal agency is limited in its power to act by its authorizing statute. Each agency should engage only in activities that further the agency's mission as defined in its authorizing statute, its implementing regulations and policies. Each agency should take care not to exceed these authorities. This includes using appropriations for authorized purposes only and abiding by all statutory restrictions, such as the Hatch Act's limitations on the use of government resources for partisan political activities and the Ethics in Government Act, as amended, and its implementing regulations.

We should consider this call to be a reminder and a teaching moment. It was organized with the best of intentions to promote community service and volunteerism, something the Administration does with many constituencies and something we will continue to do. The misunderstandings that flowed from the call should serve as a lesson going forward of the need to take extra care in planning outreach to ensure it complies with these general principles. At all times Administration employees should be focused on the twin goals of furthering their agency's mission and serving the public trust.